



The 4 Fatal Mistakes of Live RFP Presentations

Turning your oral interview into a competitive advantage

Project Team Briefing Document

*Design-Build Contractors * Consulting Engineers * Architects*

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Laying the groundwork...

Most likely responding to RFPs has been a central component of your business process for a long time. But recently others have joined the fray lured with the hope of capturing a small piece of the massive influx of 2009 federal stimulus dollars. In either case, there's a daunting amount of work ahead for you and your team. It's a time and resource depleting process that offers absolutely no reward for those coming in second or third place. It's also a process that not only places extraordinary emphasis on your ability to assemble a comprehensive written response but also puts your sharpest engineers, project managers and team members under the intense scrutiny of your presentation evaluators. And painfully, not everyone is up to the task.

Let's be honest, a great presentation won't guarantee you'll be awarded the contract, but you can be assured that one that's hastily conceived, badly messaged and poorly delivered will most certainly reduce your chances for a win. And to make things even more challenging, the oral presentation process does not necessarily play into the strengths of the typical Project Manager, Engineer or even Project Executive. Have them develop project teams, create comprehensive site plans and bring together a variety of partners – no problem. Stand them in front of a PowerPoint screen and a room of interviewers and even the best & brightest will struggle. And make no mistake about it, your interviewers are also selecting the confidence and credibility that must be present in the team delivering the live presentation.

This brief summary is a roadmap – a sanity check for bringing the best out of those who will most likely influence millions or tens of millions of project dollars. Here are the four fatal flaws they often encounter in the process – avoid them at all costs.



1 Fragmented Effort: *Teams Fail to Act Like a Team*

Like it or not, the evaluators are buying your team and they will learn a lot about you by simply observing. Not everyone presenting on behalf of your proposal may work together often and perhaps some may even be partners from outside your company. But for the 60-90 minutes you're presenting, there should be no doubt that you are a cohesive team that can articulate the winning strategy down to the person. Marginally integrated partners who seem indifferent to the other team members can cause doubts about your ability to work together to deliver the results you've promised.

If you can't do something as simple as present the plan together, how can you possibly coordinate the efforts of hundreds of people to deliver a project? Teams that come to play must share a common understanding of why they're there. So whether they are presenting, supporting or responding to Q&A, they all must have a focused sense of the key messages it will take to win the day.

Here are a few things they are looking for from your team:

- Do they share a common understanding of the project and its core approaches?
- Is there a perceived agreement for the oversight role of the owner or government entity?
- Do the skills of those presenting seem to compliment one another or are there obvious gaps?
- Is the team delivering a solution that addresses the interviewer’s “pain” or just a proposal?
- Is there a clear sense of who is leading the project and how project teams will act as one?

2

Marginal Presentation Skills: *Teams Rationalize Bad Personal Skills*

“I’ve known a lot of engineers with terrific ideas who had trouble explaining them to others. It’s always a shame when a guy with great talent can’t tell a board or committee what’s in his head” Lee Iacocca

Contrary to popular opinion, most people we present to are really not looking for perfect presenters. As a matter of fact, people who are too polished, too perfect evoke a healthy skepticism from us. But if you’ve been in the habit of excusing the marginal presentation skills of your project manager or engineer - don’t. Your oral presentation is the primary vehicle for building trust & believability in you and your proposal. Those who just can’t seem to make eye contact, exhibit nervous movement or whose speech is full of uncomfortable “uhs” and “ums”, will most likely be undermining your best efforts. Have you ever sat in a presentation where the presenter’s flailing or nervous hands made it hard to listen? Make no mistake, we all make judgments about people (or companies) not always based on reality, but most often on our perceptions. Anyone can be taught to learn the fundamentals of good presentation skills. Don’t overlook this critical area.

3

Tunnel Vision Planning: *Teams Can’t See Past Their Own Perspective*

My company, Distinction Communication, has a unique vantage point. We interact with literally hundreds of companies a year in the area of their high stakes presentations. And there’s one reoccurring issue that subverts nearly everyone’s ability to close major opportunities. Their key messages fail to consider all the perspectives in play. And this myopic, self-serving focus is all too obvious to those on the receiving end of our presentations. In developing and delivering your live presentation, there are three critical perspectives that must be considered.

Your knothole in the fence Do an honest assessment of your company’s strengths & weakness and those of the partners you will be bringing with you. Not all communication styles are effective in all situations. For example, high “analytical” styles often deliver more granular levels of detail than what is needed or wanted by the “driver” interviewer. Other interviewer styles may appear to be less engaged and may need questions directed to them to ensure their understanding. Look for resources that can help your team with an honest assessment in these areas. Also, by knowing your own vulnerabilities as a company, you can develop effective “inoculation” strategies for the oral presentation.



The interview team's knothole in the fence Although we're often convinced total project cost is always a major determiner for who is awarded contracts, other powerful forces are in play. During times of financial uncertainty, "safe" choices become extremely important and your experience and credibility in certain project types may be a major influencer but only if you have the ability to communicate those points in an articulate and believable fashion. Creative project design approaches also can have great influence. But, once again, only if you have the ability to communicate those points in a believable fashion.

Your competitor's knothole in the fence How will your competitors compete against you? How do they assess your strengths and weaknesses and what strategies will they forge to exploit them? By effectively anticipating those issues, you can forge your own oral communication strategy to not only inoculate your interviewers against those weaknesses, but go a step further to shape a positive perspective that will rob competitors of their perceived competitive advantage.

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Doing Things the Same Way & Expecting Different Results

"It's crazy to think we can approach this RFP process the same way that's been costing us projects, and hoping that somehow this time it will be different"

Those were the words of a Project Manager in a coaching workshop I recently led. As the RFP oral presentation team from the Fortune 100 company sat around the table, they knew they should be winning more RFPs. No one wins them all, and from time to time you will lose to a better company or more detailed written proposal. But you should NEVER lose an opportunity because your oral presentation team failed to articulate the proposal details, deliver it in a believable and cohesive manner and respond to Q&A with confidence.

In the current economic reality, resources that are diverted to the RFP process are costly and at a premium. And the stakes associated with losing a project (you should have won) could adversely impact your ability to survive tough times. It may be time to rethink your process - time to step back and make sure your team is doing all they can do. And maybe it's simply time for companies to look beyond themselves for help.

The RFP process may not be broken in your organization, but it very well could be aging and in need of a fresh injection of perspective, creativity and objectivity.

About the author...



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Jim Endicott is a nationally-recognized consultant, speaker and author specializing in professional presentation messaging, advanced design and delivery skills coaching and is president of his Portland-area organization, Distinction Communication, Inc. Jim was a Jesse H. Neal award-winning columnist for PRESENTATIONS magazine and has contributed presentation-related content in magazines like Business Week, Consulting and Selling Power and the Portland Business Journal.

Distinction works with client companies like Contech Construction Products, Intel, Honeywell, Regence, Reebok, Tektronix, FLIR Systems, Tripwire, Adidas, Fios, Clear Channel Communications as well as many smaller organizations, to deliver their high stakes messages more effectively.